

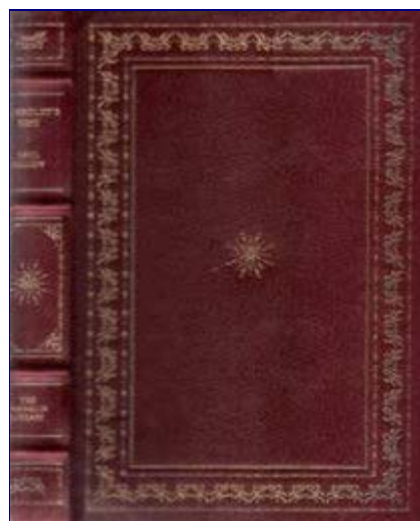
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A READER'S JOURNAL

Humboldt's Gift A Novel by Saul Bellow

ARJ2 Chapter: Reading for Enjoyment
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A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2013



The eponymous Humboldt's gift was the MacGuffin of the novel, as Hitchcock defined it, that is, a mysterious object sought by the

characters in the story. Humboldt's Gift was also a book which eluded my own search for it when I returned from a trip to San Francisco without the book in my possession. I had bought the expensive red leather-bound Franklin Books edition and read about three-fourths of the book, filling it with my notes and marginalia as a guide to my review. Thus, I was doubly chagrined to find that the book did not return with me to New Orleans. Yes, I could buy another copy, but it would not have my notes in it. So I delayed for a couple of months, hoping my son might locate the book at his home in San Anselmo where we stayed for a week. Finally giving up on the book, I ordered an identical copy, and what plopped into my mailbox was a cheap hardback on acid paper which was already yellowing. I had to negotiate a return to amazon.com for the first time, which went well, by the way, and soon a replacement book was in my hands. Now what? Do I read the entire book again or simply finish reading the part from where I left off? If I had the original book in my hands it would be easy to tell where I left off as I dog-ear the last page read and have date glyphs on places where I pick up reading. Absent these clues, I scanned through the book until I found a passage containing something familiar that I had read a month or so earlier.

The book plot is a "hero goes on a journey" starring the quintessential Chicagoan Charlie Citrine and his best friend Humboldt, already deceased, who had left him something as a parting gift, the MacGuffin. As I picked up the story line again, Charlie had been talked into going into a businessman's office with this guy, and when they arrived, the guy pulled out a gun to kill the businessman. Police arrived and were ready to handcuff Charlie also, but only had one pair of handcuffs. The secretary tried to talk the police out of the arrest by saying that Charlie was a poet, not a murderer. This droll episode led me to write a poem. Imagine a beat cop calling the police station to ask for help:

What's a Cop to Do?

Hey Sarge!
Got me a poet here —
 What am I supposed to do with a poet?
Handcuff him?
 If I did, he could still spout poetry!
Put a gag on him?
 Then he could still think poetry!
What's a cop to do with a poet?

This is life, not literature, Sarge.
We're too busy with life —
 You know, arresting crooks and thugs —
We're too busy to lock up poets.
Can't I just let this guy go?

Please, Sarge —
Look at this —
He just wrote a poem for me.

Please, Sarge!
Can I just let him go?

Please . . .

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Bellow filled this book with dozens of such vignettes in Charlie's life as he wanders around thinking about Von Humboldt Fleisher, wondering about the gift, and searching for people who could help him all the while trying to avoid his wife who is suing the literal pants off him as part of a nasty divorce.

Into Charlie's travails, Bellow mixed his own interest in the work of Rudolf Steiner. It was Bellow's interest in Rudolf Steiner which led me eventually to read this book. I had read none of Bellow's other novels, but I became curious in how this literate author might write about the Austrian philosopher and spiritual scientist whose works I have been a student of for several decades.

To set the stage for the next passage, Charlie was working on his master essay, "Boredom" and the deep suffering he claimed accompanies it.

[page 104] I hadn't read those great modern boredom experts, Stendhal, Kierkegaard, and Baudelaire, for nothing. Over the years I had worked a lot on this essay. The difficulty was that I kept being overcome by the material, like a miner by gas fumes. I wouldn't stop, though. I'd say to myself that even Rip van Winkle had slept for only twenty years, I had gone him at least two decades better and I was determined to make the lost time yield illumination.

When I find myself overcome by some material, I fall asleep, and when I awake from my short nap, I usually stop reading the material. I figure it's job of the author to keep me awake. When I first began reading Steiner in 1979, I didn't understand much of what he said, but he kept me awake and searching until finally I began to make sense of his words. Our hero, Charlie Citrine, found Steiner and had a similar experience.

[page 104, 105] So I kept doing advanced mental work in Chicago, and also joined a gymnasium, playing ball with commodity brokers and gentleman-hoodlums in an effort to strengthen the powers of consciousness. Then my respected friend Durnwald mentioned, kiddingly, that the famous but misunderstood Dr. Rudolf Steiner had much to say on the deeper aspects of sleep. Steiner's books, which I began to read lying down, made me want to get up. He argued that between the conception of an act and its execution by the will there fell a gap of sleep. It might be brief but it was deep. For one of man's souls was a sleep-soul. In this, human beings resembled the plants, whose whole existence is sleep. This made a very deep impression on me. The truth about sleep could only be seen from the perspective of an immortal spirit. I had never doubted that I had such a thing. But I had set this fact aside quite early. I kept it under my hat. These beliefs under your hat also press on your brain and sink you down into the vegetable

realm. Even now, to a man of culture like Durnwald, I hesitated to mention the spirit. He took no stock in Steiner, of course.

By this point in the book, I was hooked. Most people I know take "no stock in Steiner"; either because they have never heard of him, or what they heard made him sound like a spiritual fruitcake, not worthy of their attention, only worthy of their ridicule. In Saul Bellow I found someone who portrayed Steiner as a font of wisdom and he portrays Charlie's attempts to understand and to explain Steiner, even though "his soul was banged up".

[page 106] Dear friends, though I was about to leave town and had much business to attend to, I decided to suspend all practical activities for one morning. I did this to keep from cracking under strain. I had been practicing some of the meditative exercises recommended by Rudolf Steiner in *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds and Its Attainment*. As yet I hadn't attained much, but then my soul was well along in years and very much stained and banged up, and I had to be patient. Characteristically, I had been trying too hard, and I remembered again that wonderful piece of advice given by a French thinker: *Trouve avant de chercher* — Valéry, it was. Or maybe Picasso.

How does one "find before searching" as Valéry suggests? Most often we find things we weren't consciously searching for, but as we look back on the years or decades before the discovery, we can trace a path which we had been on which led us to the thing we eventually found. We can understand this process if we accept the presence in our life of a Guardian Angel which accompanies us through every lifetime, dropping hints which shape our decisions, directing our path to a goal of which we are otherwise not conscious. What can we do when this happens? — we can consciously thank the unconscious actions of our Guardian Angel.

In this next passage Bellow attacks the Kant dictum that we cannot know the *ding an sich*, that is, the thing in itself, that we can only know what we perceive through our senses.

[page 194] For in spirit, says Steiner, a man can step out of himself and let things speak to him about themselves, to speak about what has meaning not for him alone but also for them. Thus the sun the moon the stars will speak to nonastronomers in spite of their ignorance of science.

Charlie Citrine made a lot of money from his one successful play, and now his lawyer Tomchek, Srole (Tomchek's associate), and Pinsker, his wife's lawyer were carving up his estate as part of divorce proceedings and taking a large share for themselves. They didn't like Charlie's complaining about their work. Suddenly Charlie found inspiration for transcending the captious pettifoggers by using his new-found knowledge of higher worlds. Bellow here demonstrates one practical application of Charlie's study of spiritual science.

[page 212] Okay, they weren't going to let me knock lawyers. Pinsker belonged to the club. Who, after all, was I? A filmy transient figure, eccentric and snooty. They disliked my style entirely. They hated it. But then why should they like it? Suddenly I saw the thing from their viewpoint. And I was extremely pleased. In fact I was illuminated. Maybe these sudden illuminations of mine were an effect of the metaphysical changes I was undergoing. Under the recent influence of Steiner I seldom thought of death in the horrendous old way. I wasn't experiencing the suffocating grave or dreading an eternity of boredom, nowadays. Instead I often felt unusually light and swift-paced, as if I were on a weightless bicycle and sprinting through the star world. Occasionally I saw myself with exhilarating objectivity, literally as an object among objects in the physical universe. One day that object would cease to move and when the body collapsed the soul would simply remove itself. So, to speak again of the lawyers, I stood between them, and there we were, three naked egos, three creatures belonging to the lower grade of modern

rationality and calculation. In the past the self had had garments, the garments of station, of nobility or inferiority, and each self had its carriage, its looks, wore the sheath appropriate to it. Now there were no sheaths and it was naked self with naked self burning intolerably and causing terror. I saw this now, in a fit of objectivity. It felt ecstatic.

In a world of industrial Chicago, Charlie Citrine survived using his study of Rudolf Steiner to gain a perspective and a serenity in the midst of chaos. Even when a lawyer shouted at him, "You're nothing but a prick with a pen!" Charlie was nonplussed, even thinking what a wonderful expression that was! You can say anything you like to a writer, and if you put it elegantly or in a novel way, no matter how vile the insult, the writer will smile.

[page 213, 214] He was so sore that he surpassed himself and yelled even louder, "With or without a pen you're a prick!" But I wasn't offended. I thought this was a whopping epithet and I laughed. If you only put it right you could say what you liked to me. However, I knew exactly how I made Tomchek and Srole feel. From their side they inspired me with an unusual thought. This was that History had created something new in the USA, namely crookedness with self-respect or duplicity with honor. America had always been very upright and moral, a model to the entire world, so it had put to death the very idea of hypocrisy and was forcing itself to live with this new imperative of sincerity, and it was doing an impressive job. . . .

"I wish I knew what the hell made you look so pleased," said Srole.

"Only a thought."

"Lucky you, with your nice thoughts."

Charlie went outside the lawyer's room and meditated on a rose bush, and we learn that his *nice thoughts* were not some lucky accident as the lawyer Srole thought, but the result of hard work and study on Charlie's part.

[page 214] I concentrated all the faculties of my soul on this vision and immersed it in the flowers. Then I saw, next to these flowers, a human figure standing. The plant, said Rudolf Steiner, expressed the pure passionless laws of growth, but the human being, aiming at higher perfection, assumed a greater burden — instincts, desires, emotions. So a bush was a sleeping life. But mankind took a chance on the passions. The wager was that the higher powers of the soul could cleanse these passions. Cleansed, they could be reborn in a finer form. The red of the blood was a symbol of this cleansing process. But even if all this wasn't so, to consider the roses always put me into a kind of bliss.

Doris Scheldt learned spiritual science from her physicist father but she couldn't hold a candle to Renata in Charlie's view. "Why, Renata didn't need an ignition key to start a car. One of her kisses on the hood would turn it on. It would roar for her." (Page 250) Doris had the hots for Charlie, but the feeling was unrequited as her father bore more interest for Charlie. In this next passage we learn about the process Steiner describes as beneficial to living spirits who were left behind the material world in the time between death and a new birth, namely, the process of reading to the dead.

[page 251] Her father had been a physicist at the old Armour Institute, an executive of IBM, a NASA consultant who improved the metal used in spaceships. But he was also an anthroposophist. He didn't wish to call this mysticism. He insisted that Steiner had been a Scientist of the Invisible. But Doris, with reluctance, spoke of her father as a crank. She told me many facts about him. He was a Rosicrucian and a Gnostic, he read aloud to the dead. Also at a time when girls have to do erotic things whether or not they have the talent for them, the recent situation being what it is, Doris behaved quite bravely with me. But it was all wrong, I was simply not myself with her, and at the wrongest possible time I cried out, "Renata! Oh Renata!" Then I lay there shocked with myself and

mortified. But Doris didn't take my outcry at all hard. She was thoroughly understanding. That was her main strength. And when my talks with the Professor began she was decent about that as well, understanding that I was not going to sleep with the daughter of my guru.

Charlie studied Rudolf Steiner's works and found Doris's father, Dr. Scheldt, much help in clarifying the ideas of spiritual science. Even though Charlie found the ideas complex and mystifying, they always seemed to make sense to him in some deep, unexplainable way, similar to my own experience of studying Rudolf Steiner's works, "they always rang true". It helps one to understand the metaphor of "ring true" if one realizes that the custom of ringing bells in a church tower goes back to a time when people could still see into the spiritual world and noticed that demons scattered from an area when a bell was rung. Words ring true for us when they arrive as an insight into the spiritual world, whether or not we consciously understand the meaning of the words.

[page 252, 253] Then Dr. Scheldt begins to speak on the text, *I am the light of the world*. To him that light is understood also as the sun itself. Then he speaks of the gospel of Saint John as drawing upon the wisdom-filled Cherubim, while the gospel of Saint Luke draws upon the fiery love, the Seraphim — Cherubim, Seraphim, and Thrones being the three highest spiritual hierarchy. I am not at all certain that I am following. "I have no experience of any of this advanced stuff, Dr. Scheldt, but I still find it peculiarly good and comforting to hear it all said. I don't at all know where I'm at. One of these days when life is quieter I'm going to buckle down to the training course and do it in earnest."

"When will life be quieter?"

"I don't know. But I suppose people have told you before this how much stronger the soul feels after such a conversation."

"You shouldn't wait for things to become quieter. You must decide to make them quieter."

He saw that I was fairly skeptical still. I couldn't make my peace with things like the Moon Evolution, the fire spirits, the Sons of Life, with Atlantis, with the lotus-flower organs of spiritual perception or the strange mingling of Abraham with Zarathustra, or the coming together of Jesus and the Buddha. It was all too much for me. Still, whenever the doctrine dealt with what I suspected or hoped or knew of the self, or of sleep, or of death, it always rang true.

We all have our strengths and weaknesses, but what if what we call a weakness in ourselves is really a misunderstood or undervalued strength? Would we continue to try to rid ourselves of such a weakness? Take Iolanthe who claims that he is in love and someone says to him that love is a weakness. Iolanthe replies, "Yes, but it is a weakness that is so strong!" Many people have weaknesses that are so strong, they can only think like Iolanthe, "This is a weakness." Love can be thus considered a gift to be welcomed or a problem to be overcome. Would Humboldt's gift to Charlie turn out to be an unwelcome problem?

[page 272, 273] — I tuned out and gave my mind to one of my theories. Some people embrace their gifts with gratitude. Others have no use for them and can think only of overcoming their weaknesses. Only their defects interest and challenge them. Thus those who hate people may seek them out. Misanthropes often practice psychiatry. The shy become performers. Natural thieves look for positions of trust. The frightened make bold moves. Take the case of Stronson [RJM: who tried to have Charlie arrested for murder], a man who entered into desperate schemes to swindle gangsters. Or take myself, a lover of beauty who insisted on living in Chicago. Or Von Humboldt Fleisher, a man of powerful social instincts burying himself in the dreary countryside.

When Charlie was in the squad car, being hauled to the police station, he recalled twenty years earlier when Humboldt had been arrested and forced into a straitjacket.

[page 277] He had had diarrhea in the police wagon as they rushed him to Bellevue. They were trying to cope, to do something with a poet. What did the New York police know about poets! They knew about drunks and muggers, they knew rapists, they knew women in labor and hopheads, but they were at sea with poets.

When Charlie went to see his accountant Murra, high up in his fancy glass skyscraper office, Murra spent an hour telling Charlie that "he had failed to convince the IRS that it had no case" and submitted a bill to Charlie for \$1500 for essentially achieving or producing nothing. (Page 280) If you hire a poet instead of an accountant, at least you'll get a poem out of the deal. For example, Charlie mused about what Rip van Winkle might have done with his life, if he had not been put to sleep by the dwarves.

[page 281] He had an ordinary human American right, of course, to hunt and fish and roam the woods with his dog — much like Huckleberry Finn in the Territory Ahead. The following question was more intimate and difficult: what would I have *done* if I hadn't been asleep in spirit for so long?

My mind went completely off the rails when I read about Huck in the Territory Ahead — for over twenty years I have been buying my shirts from a catalog named [Territory Ahead](#) and I never knew, until now, that the catalog's name likely came from a passage in the famous Mark Twain novel, *Huckleberry Finn*. A quick Google search informed me that Huck said he wanted "to get to the *Territory ahead* of the rest." So, Good Reader, since you *de facto* hired me by virtue of reading this review, I must complete my part of the deal by writing a poem for you.

Seeds of the Future

Hey, Huck, where you heading?
"I reckon I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest."
Where'd you get that shirt?
"Do you know the Territory Ahead?"
Yeah, I heard you talk about it, so?

"Well, I'm heading *North to Nanaimo*."
Nice shirt, that one.
"Thanks to the Territory Ahead."

Huck, did you know Angels sow seeds of the future in us?
"Yep, visions of the Territory Ahead, huh?"
Never thought of it that way, up until now.

"Yep, it's their gift to us."
Like Humboldt's gift to Charlie?
"Nice way to put it, my friend."

So, where you reckon this Territory Ahead is, Huck?
"It's just waitin' 'round the bend."

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As an example of "finding before



searching" the process suggested by Valéry, I had found and bought a shirt from the *Territory Ahead* catalog named *North to Nanaimo*, at a time when I had no idea where Nanaimo was located. On a trip from Whistler, B.C. in 2001 to Vancouver Island, as we drove up to the Nanaimo Ferry, I was wearing my *North to Nanaimo* shirt and had arrived at my own Territory Ahead! I had found the shirt first, and then I found the far-north town of Nanaimo, all without having searched for either one. Valéry would be proud.

Here's the passage which inspired the "Angels sow seeds of future in us" line of the above poem. Charlie was thinking about our being asleep to the spirit and its effects on our life.

[page 282] Our unwillingness to come out of the state of sleep was the result of a desire to evade an impending revelation. Certain spiritual beings must achieve their development through men, and we betray and abandon them by this absenteeism, this will-to-snooze. Our duty, said one bewitching pamphlet, is to collaborate with the Angels. They appear within us (as the Spirit called the Maggid manifested himself to the great Rabbi Joseph Karo). Guided by the Spirits of Form, Angels sow seeds of the future in us. They inculcate certain pictures into us of which we are "normally" unaware. Among other things they wish to make us see the concealed divinity of other human beings. They show man how he can cross by means of thought the abyss that separates him from Spirit. To the soul they offer freedom and to the body they offer love. These facts must be grasped by waking consciousness. Because, when he sleeps, the sleeper sleeps. Great world events pass him by. Nothing is momentous enough to rouse him. Decades of calendars drop their leaves on him just as the trees dropped leaves and twigs on Rip. Moreover, the Angels themselves are vulnerable. Their aims must be realized in earthly humanity itself.

When Bellow writes "normally unaware" I take him to mean consciously unaware of the Angelic origin of the pictures which we each receive on a daily basis from our Guardian Angel, pictures, words, and hints which help direct us to the very destiny we planned for this lifetime (a plan we created during our time between a previous death and our birth into this lifetime). When something good happens, e. g. we arrive

at a Mississippi River ferry and are denied entry, only to observe the ferry sink under the waves a few minutes later, we can thank our Guardian Angel who delayed our route to work that day just enough to keep us from sinking on the ferry. Perhaps it was the angel-inspired image of hot donuts which caused us to stop and buy some which saved us [\(1\)](#).

Charlie Citrine wrote a great play which earned him a lot of money and then he went about four decades without any equivalent work, all of which led him to compare himself to Rip van Winkle, who had slept for twenty years *literally*, while Charlie had slept for forty years *literately* (i.e., with no significant literary production). Charlie was attempting to awake from his spiritual sleep by studying Rudolf Steiner's works, by meditating, and by avoiding other people, which is a huge challenge in a busy city like Chicago. If I were advising Charlie, I'd have asked him to consider this question, "How can you collect yourself, if everyone is taking pieces of you?" Charlie didn't know the reason, but he could perceive his restlessness.

Charlie could also perceive his own slothfulness, even when his early girl-friend, Naomi, couldn't. When she said, "Ridiculous. You've worked hard. I know you have, Charlie" he went into a rant about slothfulness, giving us a rather surprising exposition on a mundane subject.

[page 293] "Some think that sloth, one of the capital sins, means ordinary laziness," I began. "Sticking in the mud. Sleeping at the switch. But sloth has to cover a great deal of despair. Sloth is really a busy condition, hyperactive. This activity drives off the wonderful rest or balance without which there can be no poetry or art or thought — none of the highest human functions. These slothful sinners are not able to acquiesce in their own being, as some philosophers say. They labor because rest terrifies them.

Slothful people do not retire because the very idea of being free of external pressure to stay busy is worse than remaining in a job they hate. To retire would eliminate the restlessness, eliminate their co-workers taking pieces of them, and provide them time for restful balance, the kind needed for creative, productive work, but they have no idea of how to do such work. Sloth is a sin because it equips people with a ready excuse for doing nothing creative; you know the excuse, you've heard it often: "I'm too busy." Note the paradox: the slothful sinner keeps himself busy as an excuse for his slothfulness.

Naomi asked Charlie if he ever read her son's articles in the paper that she had sent him for his opinion. He said no, he didn't have the time, so Naomi asked if she sent again would he read it. Charlie replied, "I wouldn't dream of refusing." Naomi chides him for that reply.

[page 295] "You ought to dream of it oftener. People lay too much on you. I know I shouldn't be doing this. You're leaving town and must have plenty to do."

Charlie's present girl-friend is Renata, and when she hears of Humboldt's will (the eponymous gift), she is skeptical in the extreme.

[page 298] Renata's face took on an I'm-going-to-let-you-have-it-straight look and she said, "Charlie, this will is just a gag from the grave. You said yourself, once, that it could be a posthumous prank. The guy died nuts."

"Renata, I've read the textbooks. I know what clinical psychologists say about manic-depressives. But they didn't know Humboldt. After all, Humboldt was a poet. Humboldt was noble. What does clinical psychology know about art and truth?"

Charlie attempted to explain Humboldt's famous insomnia. Humboldt had become famous, and being famous was like picking up a high-voltage line — you couldn't let it go! (Page 299) It was a high-powered form of slothfulness which clamped onto to you. Matt Damon said in an interview in *Esquire* (August, 2013) that the worst thing a movie star can do is to marry another movie star, because the *paparazzi* won't leave them alone, adding, "I'm just a married man with a wife and family. No one wants to photograph my home life."

This next passage highlights the difference between young boys and girls, the former get people to notice them by making noise (cards in bicycle spokes, rumbling Harleys) and the latter garner notice by just walking along in their tight jeans.

[page 315] Thus we were walking along the Coney Island boardwalk. And as I, when a boy, had rattled my stick on fence palings, so Renata, when she passed the popcorn men, the caramel-corn and hot-dog men, got a rise out of each one.

While reading this 450 page novel, one comes across the same episode reiterated several times. Each time some new nuance is added, some new perspective, some filling in of details. When Renata criticized Charlie, it finally came to me: Bellow is, like Charlie, a mandolin player, he "tickles every note ten times". (page 336)

This next passage made me smile because Bellow had no idea of the double-meaning this next sentence of his would accrue with the advent of the computer revolution which was still in his future back in 1970. Renata said, "Only, you've got to stop twittering like a ten-year-old-girl." (Page 337) Did he mean that such girls would talk in sentences no longer than 140 characters? Possibly. That's the size limitation of a *twitter* or *tweet* today which goes out to some audience like a ten-year-old-girl yelling in a public place where everyone around her will be aware of what she said. Nowadays, in Twitter language, *being around* means being in some localized cyberspace defined by your own choice. Tweets have even become fodder for otherwise prestigious news broadcasts. Want to have the world taking pieces of you? Subscribe to a Twitter feed and you'll soon find out what that means. Twitter feeds and Text messages seem to provide the prime sustenance for the inveterate slothful sinner in today's totally connected milieu.

We have a friend, a CEO, whose *modus operandi* in business, we call, "Ready, Fire, Aim!" Leave it to Bellow to give us a super-literate interpretation of that process, "While timorous knowledge stands considering, audacious ignorance hath done the deed."

In pre-WWI days in England, if you were not the eldest son who stood to inherit the family estate, you had only three choices of livelihood to consider: become a Vicar, a Lawyer, or a Politician. Charlie describes Humboldt as unfit for all three.

[page 338] As for Humboldt, he was not the first man to go down trying to combine worldly success with poetic integrity, blasted with poetic fire, as Swift says, and consequently unfit for Church or Law or State.

Renata didn't think much of Charlie's dabbling in Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophy. She had enough of it and blamed the blond-haired Doris whose physicist father Charlie had spent so much time with talking about spiritual science stuff.

[page 349] "My theory is that you're punishing me with this anthroposophy. You know what I mean. That blonde runt introduced you to her dad, and since then it's all been really spooky."

This next passage ends with a droll metaphor which highlights Bellow's mellow descriptive style.

[page 390] I was first at the passport window, first at the baggage conveyor. And then — my bag was the last bag of all. The Wichita Falls party was gone and I was beginning to think my bag with its elegant wardrobe, its Hermès neckties, its old chaser's monkey-jackets, and so forth was lost when I saw it wobbling, solitary, on the long, long trail of rollers. It came toward me like an uncorseted woman sauntering over cobblestones.

To read Steiner's works is to set yourself challenge after challenge, some passages will make no sense, others will make exquisite poetry. When I began reading Steiner, I read ten books of his and still didn't know what he was writing about or why I kept reading him even when the books made so little sense to

me. Then the Internet bloomed and my first question was "What should I be reading of Steiner?" The answer came in the form of four classic works of his, and I soon discovered that the books I had read, all ten of them, were transcriptions of lectures he gave to advanced students who had read and absorbed all his basic works. Bellow gives no hints as to how he started with Steiner, but he did name several of his classic works.

[page 421] The mental respectability of good members of educated society was something I had come to despise with all my heart. I admit that I was sustained by contempt whenever the esoteric texts made me uneasy. For there were passages in Steiner that set my teeth on edge. I said to myself, this is lunacy. Then I said, this is poetry, a great vision. But I went on with it, laying out all that he told us of the life of the soul after death. Besides, did it matter what I did with myself? Elderly, heart-injured, meditating in kitchen odors, wearing Renata's cloak in the biffy — should it concern anyone what such a person did with himself? The strangeness of life, the more you resisted it, the harder it bore down on you. The more the mind opposed the sense of strangeness, the more distortions it produced.

In "What Dreams May Come" Robin Williams portrays a man whose wife committed suicide, and we follow this subsequent death as he with great effort finally locates her spirit, hidden in a bottomless pit of blackness and despair, a rather vivid portrayal of what Steiner says is the lot of suicides in their time between death and a rebirth. This kind of dark despair is something that can happen to the wrongly tutored — those atheistic types who believe life ends at death — but the completely untutored suffer nevertheless.

[page 421] It was my understanding that the untutored dead blundered and suffered in their ignorance. In the first stages especially, the soul, passionately attached to its body, stained with earth, suddenly severed, felt cravings much as amputees feel their missing legs. The newly dead saw from end to end all that had happened to them, the whole of lamentable life. They burned with pain.

Humboldt's Gift? What was it? Perhaps it was the mandolin-like vignettes of life in Chicago and overseas for Charlie Citrine? Yes, there was a script left for Charlie by Humboldt in his will and that becomes a resurrection of Charlie's career, but the plot line is not the point of this novel, rather it is the lives which Humboldt and Citrine touched and the stories they generated, stories which will enrich any reader brave enough to open this large book and engage life with Saul Bellow as one's guide.

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----- *Footnotes* -----

Footnote 1. Around 1977 I lived at an apartment complex with a young man who drove up on his motorcycle to get on the Luling ferry one morning. The gate had just been closed, but they had always re-opened it for him in the past because there was always room for his small motorcycle. This morning they didn't re-open the gate, and the ferry was rammed by a ship, many people dying in the collision and sinking.

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